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Housatonic greenway takes another step

John Burgeson, Staff Writer

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From left; Susan Hitchcock of Sikorsky, Amy Jackson-Grove of the Federal Highway Administration, and Linda Barlow of Sikorsky, check out the new signage on the Housatonic Estuary Walk during an unveiling ceremony on Thursday, August 5, 2010. Photo: Brian A. Pounds / Connecticut Post | [Buy This Photo](#)

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STRATFORD -- There's an ambitious plan to make the Housatonic River, from its headwaters in Massachusetts to its mouth in Milford and Stratford, a greenway where cyclists and hikers can enjoy scenic vistas along its banks.

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On Thursday, officials from various public and private agencies took a small step toward that goal by opening the Sikorsky Estuary Walk

"The [Housatonic Valley Association](#) has a vision for creating a greenway along the Housatonic River from its source up in Massachusetts to Long Island Sound," said [Elaine LaBella](#), the director of land protection for the HVA. "Our greenway is geared to bring people to river, finding places for people to access the river, and creating other recreational opportunities along the Housatonic.

The estuary walk includes a portion of the existing Sikorsky Bridge bikeway/walkway that opened May 5, 2007. It consists of three interpretive signs that tell about the natural history and wildlife found along the tidal stretch of the Housatonic.

The trailhead is across the street from the Ryder's Landing shopping plaza parking lot. The trail was created with a grant from the Sikorsky Aircraft. The signs cost about \$5,000 each, officials said.

"This is the first in a series of signs that we'll erect in other towns along the Housatonic River," LaBella said, adding that the helicopter company will also pay for interpretive signs that will be set up along the river walk in downtown Shelton, and along Derby's greenway. These will be installed within the next 12 months.

"Stratford, Shelton and Derby are good examples of communities that have heavy industry along the river, but they're still places where people can reconnect with it," said [Meghan Ruta](#), HVA's water protection manager. "We can't undo the development that's been done, but we can still educate people about the Housatonic, and it still has beauty, even when it flows through an industrial setting."

Ruta added that in spite of the river's reputation -- it was more-or-less a sewer for industrial waste and human sewage through the 1960s -- the water quality today is "pretty high," and wildlife has returned.

"This is a long-term vision," said Ruta, noting that HVA is more than 70 years old. The association is based in Cornwall.

She said there still are challenges to the river. Parking lots and roads generate polluted runoff,

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as well as with over-fertilized lawns. Then there is a raft of aggressive invasive animals and plants ---- most from Asia ---- that crowd out native species.

"Sikorsky has been working with the Housatonic Valley Association for a number of years," said Susan Hitchcock, a Sikorsky spokeswoman. "And this is a great way for our employees to learn about the Housatonic, too."

In addition to the HVA, another interested group is the East Coast Greenway, which aims to establish a bike trail extending 3,000 miles from Quebec to the tip of the Florida Keys, according to Rob Dexter, the greenway's Connecticut ambassador.

Two hundred miles of the East Coast Greenway run through Connecticut, he said.

"This is a huge link," he said referring to the Sikorsky Bridge bike trail. "There's a railroad line in Milford that'll swing down through Silver Sands State Park, and then from there it goes through New Haven, up the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail, up to Simsbury, Hartford, East Hartford, Bolton, Willimantic and on east to Providence. It goes through 25 of the major East Coast cities."

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